

# Harassment of Fundraisers: A New Report

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What was only whispered about last year at this time is now out in the open and finally receiving the attention it deserves: sexual harassment and assault in the nonprofit sector and – particularly – the plight of vulnerable fundraisers at the hands of powerful donors and board members.

## *Fundraisers' Vulnerability*

For many organizations, the fundraising or development professional is vital to its success. But that person's activities take him or her beyond the usual employer-employee interaction and often include out-of-office meetings with established or prospective donors.

According to fundraising expert and writer Beth Ann Locke, sexual harassment is “(a)n insidious use of power and/or privilege over those with less...; the need for donations outstrips the need for protection from sexual harassment.” Well-known nonprofit commentator, Vu Le, agrees that “power dynamics” are a key to the “perpetuation of sexual harassment” in the fundraising context.

## *Fundraiser Harassment Widespread*

In 2017, as revelations of workplace sexual harassment became major media stories, plans were made for a sector-wide study of the problem for fundraisers in the nonprofit sector.

On April 5, 2018, the Chronicle of Philanthropy and the Association of Fundraising Professionals (AFP) released a first-of-its kind study and survey of sexual harassment of fundraisers. Respondents were 1,040 members of AFP (90% from the U.S. and 10% from Canada), either in-house fundraisers or consultants to nonprofits. The survey was compiled from an online poll conducted in February 2018 by the well-known Harris Poll firm.

The full report is titled “Professional Harassment Survey.” In an article in the Chronicle of Philanthropy on April 5, 2018, Timothy Sandoval writes about the findings and conclusions. The

results are dramatic but not necessarily surprising to fundraising professionals who – over many years – have silently suffered from this kind of abuse. Some observers believe that the survey would have revealed worse statistics if people who had left the field of fundraising on account of this rampant abuse had been included.

A quarter of female fundraiser respondents reported having been sexually harassed compared with only 7% of the males taking the survey. (The harassers are 96% male.) Of the respondents who reported on-the-job sexual harassment, two-thirds said that donors were the culprits; the rest answered that colleagues, “mostly those in senior positions,” were responsible. Thirty-five percent also replied that “board members — who often make big gifts to organizations — have been at fault in at least one instance.”

Responding fundraisers, in the group reporting they have been harassed, described the type of conduct involved: 80% were subjected to “inappropriate comments of a sexual nature”; 55% “experienced unwanted touching or physical contact”; 36% “encountered unwelcome sexual advances”; 29% “faced verbal abuse of a sexual nature” and 26% “received requests for sexual favors.”

When these same respondents were asked about what, if any, action they took, 43% said they reported the conduct to their organizations, but 27% took no action at all. “Others took smaller steps, like distancing themselves from offenders.” Over a quarter of the entire group of responding fundraisers “said they’d heard about or witnessed sexual harassment but took no action.”

Of those fundraisers who reported the abuse, “(s)lightly more than half ... were either somewhat dissatisfied or extremely dissatisfied with how the organization handled their allegations.”

## *Solutions*

Timothy Sandoval reiterates the point made by other observers that any solution to this problem must “focus on power dynamics” especially “(b)ecause women are the main targets of sexual misconduct.” Although “70 percent of fundraisers are women,... chief-executive and board jobs, especially at elite nonprofits, are often held by men.”

And, of course, most big donors are older men with substantial influence because fundraisers are generally evaluated based on their success in pulling in large donations. Adding to this challenge, according to experts, is the intimate setting in which many donor-fundraiser meetings take place: homes, bars, restaurants. That increases the odds that harassment will occur.

“We cannot address this issue,” Vu Le asserts, “without acknowledging the power imbalance in our sector, between board and staff, between donors and fundraisers, between staff and clients, etc.”

In the urgent task of developing solutions to this entrenched problem, nonprofits must unequivocally, commit to an organizational philosophy and promise to their personnel including fundraisers that they do not place a higher value on donor dollars than on the personal safety and dignity of their staff and fundraising consultants.

## *Conclusion*

A nonprofit organization must “create an environment that is safe for [their] staff, volunteers, and community members” which includes “having strong policies: anti-harassment written declarations, employee handbooks, board governance manuals, and gift-acceptance policies that make clear to outsiders, including donors, that there is a zero-tolerance policy on harassment.